

*Cahiers du*  
MONDE RUSSE

## **Cahiers du monde russe**

Russie - Empire russe - Union soviétique et États  
indépendants

**57/4 | 2016**  
**Varia**

---

# Anna Fishzon, Fandom, Authenticity, and Opera - Mad Acts and Letter Scenes in Fin-de-Siècle Russia

Linda Edmondson

---



### **Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/10018>

DOI: 10.4000/monderusse.10018

ISSN: 1777-5388

### **Publisher**

Éditions de l'EHESS

### **Printed version**

Date of publication: 1 October 2016

Number of pages: 928-931

ISBN: 978-2-7132-2542-0

ISSN: 1252-6576

### **Electronic reference**

Linda Edmondson, « Anna Fishzon, Fandom, Authenticity, and Opera - Mad Acts and Letter Scenes in Fin-de-Siècle Russia », *Cahiers du monde russe* [Online], 57/4 | 2016, Online since 01 October 2018, Connection on 25 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/10018> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.10018>

---

---

Anna FISHZON

**Fandom, Authenticity, and Opera**

**Mad Acts and Letter Scenes in Fin-de-Siècle Russia**

Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 273 p.

The purpose of this book is to examine opera and its reception in late imperial Russia from a new perspective. The author's concern is not with the evolution of the musical and dramatic forms in themselves, but with audiences, impresarios, the press and in particular the creation of fandom. Fishzon places her subject in a context of European consumer culture as it developed in the late nineteenth century and follows recent work in claiming that the most distinctive feature of this culture was the "sensationalization of everyday life," this being a "central aspect of modernity." Authenticity, she claims, "was histrionic and pungent" (p. 1), "defined in melodramatic terms," and nowhere as much as in St Petersburg and Moscow in the fin-de-siècle. "Russian periodicals and newspapers, political speeches, revolutionary actors, and the private correspondence of so-called ordinary people regularly articulated extreme emotional states and gushing avowals. Opera fandom and celebrity, I claim, were at the center of this modern and especially Russian aesthetic project." (p. 2)

At the same time Fishzon is concerned to integrate music and its reception into the study of history and asks why the recent work of musicologists and literary experts on music in late imperial Russia has received virtually no attention from "mainstream" historians. She suggests that this oblivion arises in part from a perception of music audiences in this period as either an uninteresting mass or a cultural elite. I would argue that the neglect of music in history writing reflects the marginalization of "classical" music and music education in our own culture, except when it is presented as a celebrity event (such as the Three Tenors in the 1990s). In this sense Fishzon's description of the "melodramatic" and celebrity culture in fin-de-siècle Russia will seem very familiar to us now.

The book has five main chapters. The first describes the entrepreneurs, preeminently Savva Mamontov, who after the imperial monopoly of opera houses was lifted in 1882, established the Moscow Private Opera and with it a new conception of opera and its consumers. The new impresarios were not only aiming to popularise and democratise opera and opera-going, appealing to the growing urban middle class in Russia's capitals with the specific intention of educating them. They were also dedicated to the creation of a new music drama in Russia, in which the singer's ability to enter the character of the role was as important as his or her musical prowess, and the stage sets were not backdrops to the musical action, but artworks in themselves. Mamontov's plans to educate his audience by mounting productions of the classical operas of Gluck and Mozart were, however, confounded by his patrons' lack of interest and he appears to have had to persuade his audiences to accept *La Bohème* when he first produced it in the 1896-1897 season (p. 27). There is some ambiguity here in Fishzon's text; she quotes Cui's disdain for Puccini as evidence of the audience's indifference, apparently contradicting her

stated intention to move away from standard music criticism in the newspapers as evidence of a work's popularity and of its significance in the reception of opera in this "melodramatic" environment (p. 3-4).

Chapter 2 focuses on the phenomenon of celebrity in an increasingly commercialized society and on the new celebrities who emerged in this new cultural environment, notably Fedor Shaliapin and later Ivan Ershov, when Wagner mania struck St Petersburg. Fishzon notes how the Imperial Opera houses responded to competition from the Private Opera, while the singers in both enjoyed far higher earnings than under the previous state monopoly and far wider coverage in the entertainment press and in advertising.

Chapter 3 moves on to the consumers of this operatic and theatrical culture, beginning with an account of a new phenomenon in Russia, the "*psikhopatka*" (literally "madwoman"), a satirical and misogynist caricature of the opera fan, whose interest was almost exclusively centred on the male opera star, his voice, physique and persona. Fishzon takes the "*psikhopatka*" seriously, seeing her as the natural product of an increasingly commercialised opera and theatre world, where even the Imperial Theatres adopted "middlebrow" advertising strategies to attract their audiences (p. 81). She correctly links the caricaturing of the female fan to the greater roles for women on stage and their increasing fame and wealth, similarly the butt of the satirical journals. She also links it, though too briefly, to the New Woman, celebrated and deplored all over Europe and the New World in this era.

In Chapter 4 she discusses the problem of authenticity from the perspective of reproduced sound made possible (and hugely popular) by the advent of the gramophone. There is a lengthy account of the arrival of foreign gramophone and record companies in Russia and popular enthusiasm for the new medium, which brought the magical voices of celebrated singers into the home for the first time (p. 114). Predictably, the satirical press latched on to this new phenomenon and Fishzon provides entertaining examples of their work, which satirised both the consumers of the new sounds (often represented as female) and the predominantly male purchasers of the new technology, who were portrayed as obsessed with the latest model of gramophone, rather than the content of the records they played. The issue of authenticity here is treated as both a philosophical problem (quoting Adorno and others) and as a problem of "cultural legitimacy" (p. 118), which concerned the impact that recorded music would and did have on live music, an issue that is still with us.

At the same time I am not convinced by Fishzon's linking of this theme with "Russia's particular melodramatic notion of the authentic" (p. 114). She follows Adorno in discerning the new passion for recorded sound as "narcissistic," reflecting the "age of crowds and mass reproducibility," whereas one might equally interpret it as a wish to find a technology that could reproduce a performance with as much fidelity as was possible. The early recordings obviously could not do this, but the wish for "authenticity" could legitimately be seen as a wish for technical perfection rather than an expression of narcissistic desires (the two not being synonymous). I am not persuaded by Fishzon's claim that "discussions about sound fidelity

[...] were about another faith: like opera fans' ardent letters, they trumpeted the importance of personal authenticity and its extravagant, confessional imperatives on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution." (p. 147) Perhaps all the listener was hoping for, one day, was a sound system that conveyed the authenticity of a live performance without distortion.

The last chapter opens with Tatiana's letter scene from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, which Fishzon then juxtaposes with an actual letter written to Shaliapin by a besotted fan who, she speculates, may well have seen Tchaikovsky's opera. Her argument seems to be that the composer has turned Pushkin's ironic poem into a melodrama whose popularity confirms Fishzon's thesis about the sensationalisation of Russian culture in the fin-de-siècle. Leaving aside the problem that *Eugene Onegin* was composed at the end of the 1870s, well before the end of the century and still forty years before the 1917 Revolution, I am unconvinced by Fishzon's claim that the opera is a melodrama, unless all tragic operas are melodramatic, which could be argued. The plot, after all, is Pushkin's and the most tragic episode in it is Lenskii's death in a duel with Onegin, a not unknown occurrence in Pushkin's time and the fate of Pushkin himself. Compared with opera plots from Monteverdi onwards, *Onegin* is more melancholy than melodramatic and Tchaikovsky's music throughout the opera is often lyrical and very varied, finely wrought and rarely overwrought. Even the letter scene itself conveys a wonderful range of emotion and I think Fishzon gives a misleading impression of it in her description of the music.

If it is accepted that *Eugene Onegin* is less melodramatic than, say, *Rigoletto*, then Fishzon's determination to deploy it as evidence of the "melodramatic imagination" peculiar to Russia in the closing years of the Romanov regime does not stand up. Although it is a provocative thesis, I do not feel that she has demonstrated in the book that Russian culture in this period was intrinsically more "sensational" than elsewhere in Europe.

I also feel that her admirable intention of integrating music history into "mainstream" history is not quite achieved here and she misses some crucial clues as to the politics lurking behind significant events or writings. She quotes hidden messages in a number of texts, such as an article published in a theatrical journal in 1910, where the author refers rather obliquely to the essential role of theatre in "an otherwise stifled and frozen country" (p. 75), or four years later an introductory essay to Sergei Zimin's (unpublished) history of private opera in Russia, in which Nikolai Kochetov writes about those in Russian society who "struggled to break free and attempt great deeds but were forced by circumstances to waste their talents on everyday, humdrum occupations". (p. 30) Although Fishzon recognises that the language was employed to evade censorship, she does not pick up the ways in which, particularly from 1900, such statements, referring to the stifling of social initiative, became standard rhetoric for the liberal opposition which in 1905 came out in open revolt. Equally, there is a political context for the "scandal" of Shaliapin being obliged early in 1911 to join the chorus of the Mariinskii Theatre in singing "God Save the Tsar" before Nicholas II at a performance of *Boris Godunov* and precipitating a storm of controversy as a result. (p. 171) Rather than informing us

why this was such a controversy (the political climate was extremely polarised at this point and only nine months later the prime minister, Stolypin, was assassinated), Fishzon incorporates the story into her narrative of fan letters to the celebrity singer.

More could also be made of gender politics. While gender relations underpin the entire work, Fishzon does not pay attention to the actual changes in Russian society in the last fifty years of the Imperial regime, in which women attained access to education at all levels, women's employment outside the home increased and, from 1905, campaigns for women's suffrage (as part of the liberal and revolutionary movements for political change) developed. The more visible women became, whether as teachers, doctors or celebrity actresses, the more women were subjected to misogyny and satirical lampoons. More acknowledgement of this would have added to the discussion of women as consumers of culture and perhaps shed more light on those adoring fans, whose letters have been preserved in the archives and which she uses to great effect.

There is a wealth of material in this book, much of it very entertaining and informative. There is some repetition between chapters and some incoherent organisation, as though the chapters had originated as separate articles. Finally, a plea to the publishers: this book would have been so much easier to read if the extensive endnotes, some of them providing important information and comment, had been incorporated into the text as footnotes.

**Linda Edmondson**

*University of Birmingham, UK*

---

P É R I O D E S O V I É T I Q U E  
E T P O S T S O V I É T I Q U E

*Yanni KOTSONIS*

**States of Obligation**

**Taxes and Citizenship in the Russian Empire and Early Soviet Republic**

Toronto – Buffalo – London : University of Toronto Press, 2014, 504 p.

À travers l'étude de l'imposition (du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'à la collectivisation), cet ouvrage somme constitue une tentative particulièrement réussie et sophistiquée d'histoire politique de l'État moderne en Russie. Le livre comble un manque en inscrivant cet empire dans une histoire comparative des systèmes de taxation. L'État, l'économie et l'individu constituent les trois concepts convoqués par Kotsonis, leur signification et relations mutuelles évoluant profondément pendant la période allant de la fin du servage au Grand Tournant stalinien qui constitue le cœur de l'ouvrage.

L'auteur restitue les nombreux débats et les tentatives de révision du système fiscal menées au sein du gouvernement, du ministère des Finances, dans les